

A Mary Christmas Surprise

Luke 1:26-38

According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, while both male and female reindeer grow antlers every summer, male reindeer drop their antlers by late November to mid-December. Female reindeer retain their antlers till after they give birth in the spring. Therefore, according to every historical rendition depicting Santa's reindeer, every single one of them, from Rudolph to Blitzen, had to be a girl. All these years, Santa has been keeping his mouth shut and letting the whole world think that it's been him and the boys that have pulled Christmas together.

Even if the secular myths surrounding Christmas have proved fraudulent, the true story nicely vindicates the female gender. When God pulled the first Christmas together, the most important task in the story was for a young woman, probably, little more than a girl. We don't know if it was day or night, but we do know that it was in Nazareth of Galilee that the angel Gabriel appeared to this young woman and spoke the words, "Do not be afraid ..."

Fear has been a part of the human experience since the Fall of man. When Adam and Eve sinned in Eden, their first instinct was to hide from the Creator Who had previously been a Friend and a Companion, and their children have tended to flee into darkness and away from God's light ever since. For the past few weeks, we have been tracing God's strategy for dispelling this fear by drawing people into a reconciled state with Himself. This strategy would culminate in a promise.

This promise was first worded to the patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was kept alive for God's covenant people through four centuries of slavery in Egypt and through numerous miraculous deliverances of the nation, most notably, the deliverance through the Red Sea. The promise endured as a nation was built, and even after it divided and began to decline. The promise remained alive through a period of captivity in a foreign land. Finally, when the time had fully come, the Promise would come to us in the form of a baby, a baby named Jesus.

I. The Fear of Encountering the Holy

²⁶In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. – Luke 1:26, 27

A. Such an Encounter Would Shake Anyone

Six months earlier, this same Gabriel had appeared to a priest named Zechariah in the temple, and "he was gripped with fear" (Luke 1:12). This was a typical reaction for people whenever God made himself known to them either by a messenger angel or by some other means. It's not merely the fact that such a visitation is spooky. It is simply the nature of sinful people to respond uneasily to holiness. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Isaiah, Gideon – they all cringed a bit in the presence of God's holiness. There is something unnerving about holiness for sinful people.

Under Roman rule, the land that had once been ruled by David and Solomon was now divided into four regions: Judea, Galilee, Perea and Samaria. Nazareth of Galilee was about as different from Jerusalem of Judea as any two places could be. Jerusalem was much bigger. It was the home of the temple and the seat of the national religion. The citizens in and near Jerusalem were called Jews and lived in near enough proximity to the temple to be very conscientious about the ritualistic demands of observing their faith. Their religious education was more solid.

Galilee, on the other hand, was a busy and commercially prosperous area. The Galileans were not irreligious, but they were also not as “kosher” as their Judean counterparts. Nazareth in Galilee was not on any of the major trade routes, which made it a little more run down than the wealthy fishing cities on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. People who had reason to fall out of sight gravitated to Nazareth. It was a “no account” place even to most Galileans. Years later, when Philip would invite Nathanael to meet Jesus, a prophet from Nazareth, the latter man responded, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?” John 1:46).

The Bible says that even angels long to look into the workings of God as it pertains to the salvation of the human race. I suspect that mortals cannot relate well to an angel’s thought processes. Still, I would like to ask Gabriel some day if he was a little bewildered on his journey from the City of David and the home the temple, where he appeared to Zechariah, to Nazareth in Galilee. The Galileans were seen as country cousins by the Jews in Judea. Nazareth had an “other side of the tracks” standing even among Galilean towns. But, Gabriel made the journey, he went to Mary and he delivered his message, saying: “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28).

B. Even this Tender Greeting Did Not Calm Mary

If I were to ever encounter a heavenly being, I could only hope that the first words out of his mouth might be an assurance that God holds me in high favor. “Relax! God likes you just fine. In fact, He has something special He wants you to do.” Any visitation by any angel would be traumatic, and God’s angel did everything he could to break the ice with Mary gently, but Gabriel was still a heavenly being, and Mary was still a simple girl from a no account village.

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be ...
- Luke 1:29

Mary humbly thought, “What could heaven possibly want with me?” And yet, we know that God takes great delight in working through people that no one would have ever expected God would ever want to use. The most successful Christian missionary in history was a nasty persecutor of the early church. The man God sent to Egypt to demand the release of His people from slavery stumbled over his words. The greatest king in Israel’s history was the runt of Jesse’s litter. Mary seemed the most unlikely candidate in the world for that assignment God would give to her.

... ³⁰But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” - Luke 1:30-33

Jesus was a form of Joshua, which means “*JEHOVAH* saves.” Many little boys were named Jesus, for Joshua of the Old Testament was a heroic figure. But, every other word of Gabriel’s message reinforced that this child would be God’s *messiah*, a king that an oppressed nation had been longing for ever since the prophets of old had first spoken about Him – Son of the Most High – heir to David’s throne – ruler of an eternal kingdom. Every Jewish woman with any sensitivity at all to the promises of God dreamed that she might mother the savior of the nation. That once-for-all-time privilege was granted to Mary of Nazareth, a virgin betrothed to a village carpenter.

C. Every Believer, in Some Way, Must Encounter Heaven

Of all the people of faith who have ever lived, very few have experienced visitations from heavenly beings, but I believe that a point arrives when every person must see his own sinfulness juxtaposed against the righteousness of God. For some, this reckoning occurs through some dramatic salvation experience that drives them to their knees and compels them to cry out to God for mercy. Others are blessed to have been raised in the faith by Christian parents. They have embraced that faith. They have observed the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Still, there will come a point, perhaps, many years into their Christian walk, when they come to more clearly understand the holiness of God and their own personal need for His grace.

We are foolish to try to pigeonhole one another into so many standardized experiences of salvation. That has proved to be very divisive through the years. What is vital is that we all eventually come to understand our smallness in the light of God's bigness, that we see our fallenness in the light of His perfection and that we see our sinfulness in the light of His righteousness. Only then, will we really see God's grace for what it is. Only then will we truly hunger and thirst for grace. Clearly seeing Who God is and who we are brings us to the point of worship, of fellowship, of unity and of purpose that our hearts yearn after and that God requires.

II. The Fear of Engaging the Hassle

A. Mary's Reply Blended Her Fear with Her Faith

Immediately, Mary's thoughts must have reached into the circumstances of her life that seemed to scream, "This cannot be." Her station in life did not warrant such an honor. She was a little person from a little blue-collar town with a seedy image. If Mary was a typical young woman, her betrothal to Joseph was a binding contract that her father had entered her into just after she reached puberty. This is why many speculate that she was little more than a child. A betrothal lasted for one year before the wedding. After that, she would simply be the wife of a village carpenter. There didn't seem to be much potential for greatness in anything pertaining to Mary's life. She asked one question, but it simply represented what must have many questions.

³⁴"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" - Luke 1:34

Last week, we studied Gabriel's visit to Zechariah, the old priest who would father John the Baptist, the forerunner who would prepare the way for the kingdom of Jesus by calling the nation to repentance. We stopped before we got to the part where Zechariah asked a question:

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time." - Luke 1:18-20

Now, wait just a minute. Zechariah asked a question and he gets zapped dumb. And, the old man remains unable to speak until the day his son John is to be named. Mary will get a pass. In fact, she'll get a straight answer, a very strange answer, but a straight one. We can only conclude that Gabriel recognized the difference between the spirits in which the two questions were posed.

Zechariah's question was, "How can I be sure of this?" If angels are at all prone to sarcasm and exasperation, Gabriel might have answered something like: "Aw, I don't know, Zach. Maybe you can be sure ... BECAUSE I'M AN ANGEL. Hello? Anybody home? Aren't we standing in the second most sacred spot on the planet? Isn't the mercy seat of God Himself just on the other side of this big curtain behind me? This is the last place in the world I'm going to pull your leg, Zechariah. Mortals! God loves you guys. Go figure."

Mary's question, "How will this be ... since I am a virgin" needs to be interpreted as an offer of availability to do whatever God might instruct. Was she to move up the wedding date? Was she to sever the betrothal with Joseph and marry someone God had in mind for her? That could be messy and it would likely put her at odds with her own family as well as Joseph's. Was she just to sit tight and go through with the plans that had already been made? For Mary to ask how she was to fulfill God's plan was not a prayer of doubt, but a prayer for His direction and an expression of her willingness to follow it. Still, she could not have expected the answer she got.

B. Mary's Consolation Is Our Consolation

³⁵The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷For nothing is impossible with God." - Luke 1:35-37

This idea of God overshadowing Mary is reminiscent of how God manifested His presence in the Old Testament. At creation, the Spirit of God hovered above the waters. When the Israelites left Egypt in the days of Moses, they were led by a cloud of His presence. When the tabernacle was completed, a cloud of God's glory covered it. A similar cloud filled Solomon's temple.

Mary would be covered by God's presence and would conceive a child. She was right when later, in a song of praise, she would announce: "From now on all generations will call me blessed ..." (Luke 1:48). Never before and never again would such a gracious calling be extended to a woman. We do feel good for her, but that's not the only reason we call her "blessed." We call her "blessed" because the blessing God sent into the world through this precious lady would be the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to bless the world.

Mary is blessed because she brought the Son of God into the world, but we are blessed as well, because He came into the world to save us. The Son made the Father known. Everything that can be known about Who God is and what He is like is evident in Jesus. In Jesus, God became flesh. He was born in the lowliest conceivable setting so that no one could ever confuse the world's notions of greatness and power with the wisdom and power of God. He modeled godliness before the world's gaze. Then, He shouldered our sins on a cross and presented His own righteousness to the Father that His righteousness might cover us in God's eyes. All generations call Mary "blessed," but for related reasons, we don't have things too bad ourselves.

C. Before there was Ever a Cross, Mary Embraced Hers

³⁸"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. - Luke 1:38

Mary could have said, “Lord, I asked, ‘How’ ... ‘since I am a virgin,’ and Gabriel told me, but in a few months, other people are going to start asking, ‘How?’ and I’m not sure I can be as convincing as Gabriel is. Joseph will despise me. My family will be embarrassed. The community is going to ostracize me. Those old hens down at the synagogue are going to whisper about me. I know that Gabriel said this was all because you highly favor me, but it’s really not necessary. As you know, I’m getting married soon. I’d have been perfectly happy with a toaster.”

But, Mary must have sensed that the joy of being an integral part of the long-term purposes of God would prove far greater than the joy of any short-term self-interest. And, in the final analysis, isn’t that what Jesus is inviting us each to understand when He says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Much of what is passes today for Christianity flourishes because while it may offer excitement, entertainment, life pointers and all sorts of affirmations for one’s self-image, it systematically ignores and even avoids the demands of bearing a cross in obedience to Christ. What little sacrifice is encouraged usually has some promise of a return attached to it. If it’s not to receive more, it may simply be to feel the “warm fuzzies” of doing a good turn. The sacrifice of following Jesus is always significant. To follow Jesus at all is to follow Him on the path of the cross. And, before Jesus ever articulated this spirit of genuine self-denial, a young virgin from Nazareth denied herself of her own future as she had it figured out and entrusted it to God.

All generations to date have called Mary “blessed” and future generations will continue to do so. But, listen to something else Luke records. One day, Jesus was teaching, and one woman who heard the wonderful things He was saying, simply could not contain herself:

²⁷As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.”

²⁸He replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” – Luke 11:27, 28

What does this tell us? If obedience and the life into which Jesus call us truly renders us as blessed as Mary herself, then just how important is this obedience? How frivolously does the church of our age treat this matter of dying to oneself? May we always have ears to hear what Jesus is saying. May we always embrace the life into which Jesus calls us.

May we all find our blessedness where Mary found hers; in humble obedience to the will of God.

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